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IZ STRUKE ZA STRUKU

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**Abstract:** This article delivers a brief review of the history of the Kazakhstani puppet theater and recons from the ancient Turkic age, extending to modern puppetry arts. The purpose of this research is to trace how the cultural traditions of the past are embodied into the modern theater, and also to reveal the authenticity of the theatrical and spectacular arts of the Kazakhstani nomads. Special consideration is devoted to the study of the existence of the indigenous arts of the Kazakh nation – the *Orteke* [OR-Teh-Keh]. *Orteke* was common not only among Kazakhs, but also among some of the other nomadic nations of Central Asia. This art directly links to shaman practices and always goes together with playing musical instruments. The second part of this article is devoted to the history of the puppet theater of Kazakhstan during the Soviet era. The repertoire, subject, and technical features of the puppet theater created under the direct influence of the Soviet Russian theater are analyzed as well. The lack of own resources and the absence of vocational schools for training puppeteer actors were partly filled by cooperation with other theaters of the Soviet Union, however it was rather an incidental experience. The last part of the article is devoted to the description of one of the most famous and favorite characters of Kazakh legends – Aldar-Kosse. The author provides a detailed description of Aldar-Kosse's puppet designs, his suits, and ways of puppet manipulation.

**Key words:** puppet theater, *orteke*, traditional culture, musical and theatrical performance.

## The Heritage of the Steppe and Modern Art Forms in Kazakhstani Puppetry

The puppet theater of Kazakhstan has followed a difficult path from musical and theatrical *orteke* presentations, widespread in the traditional nomadic environment, to the professional theaters of European tradition. Yet today, despite the ideological and cultural shocks of the twentieth century, the Kazakhstani puppet theater has not forgotten its roots.

First of all, *Orteke* art is a musical art. Its sources, according to Kazakhstani musicologists, should be sought for in the ancient Turkic age. Numerous pieces of archaeological and ethnographical evidence (in particular, the rock drawings of dancing people, the jumping goats, horses, and mouflons), force us to assume that *Orteke* began about 3,000 years ago<sup>[2]</sup>.

*Orteke* is an original tradition of puppet presentations with the participation of wooden jumping goats. Some parts of their bodies are mobile; they are attached by threads (scaffolds) to the fingers of the performing musician on a *dombra* – a wooden plucked instrument with two strings. The performer touches the strings, and the goats according to the set rhythm of jumping, and falling to the ground, lifting and hanging of the puppets heads. All this occurs on the small specially designed support, which doesn't allow the viewer to see all of the "kitchen" of the presentation. Sometimes, this support was made of an ancient Kazakh percussion instrument – the *Dauyilpaz* (DAH-UH-Eel-PAZ), (bass drum), which has a built-in metal core for the fastening of the body of the goat. From below, the core is connected to a foot of the performer and thus is manipulated by him. Simultaneously, the *dombra* performer can operate three animals (with his two hands and a foot) serially and at the same time.

*Orteke* is a dance of a lame, wounded animal. The goat became a symbol of this specific nomadic art and gave it the name ("teke" in Kazakh – a goat, "or", perhaps, – a hole, a trap from which the goat tries to get out). The goat, along with a horse, a mouflon, a deer and some other representatives of a non-syncretic and non-predatory "beast"<sup>[3]</sup> is among the so-called "Great animals", whose



images in many respects defined the esthetic and ideological phenomenon of Saka's "animal" style. It is also not to be neglected that the goat was "the patron of shamans" [4], who used musical instruments and expressive visual images for their rituals. These magic actions - accompanied by music - fascinatingly influenced the society's members particularly with their timbre patch of national tools, and also some specific sound-and-gesture forms aimed at the sound-imitation of the voices of animals and birds, hissing, whistling, guttural and throat singing etc. [5] Orteke wooden figures, like the Kachina dolls of the American Indians, were perceived as organic parts of the actions. Numerous petroglyphs on the territory of Kazakhstan kept a visual image of a goat, its grace, fragility, and some frangibility of a silhouette that was reflected in these wooden figures.

There are many Orteke execution variations. So, the Almaty musician, Almaz Mustafayev "forces" his goats to dance on his own head. The performer from Eastern Kazakhstan - Muratkhan Donbayev - made a dombra of an unusual square shape with an attached plate for Orteke. The musician hides behind a screen so that only the dancing goats - who can turn 360 degrees - could be seen by the spectators. The master, Aytileu Mamyrbayev works in the Aktyubinsk puppet theater; he makes Orteke out of clear plastic, decorated with pastes and gilding. The performer inserts diode bulbs from a usual lighter into the legs of the goat. During the hoof dance, it looks as if the animal was making sparks with its hooves.



"Turan", folklore ensemble of Kazakhstan, performer of Orteke  
Photo © Irina Antonova

Excepting the dombra, other musical instruments are used: these are the sazsyrynay [SAZ-Sir-Nai] - an egg-shaped wind instrument with two openings made of clay; the shankobyz [SHAN-KOBYZ] - a reed tool made of metal, which is held in the mouth by the teeth, and the right hand brings its core into fluctuation, thus eliciting a sound. The Orteke performer has to be a virtuoso. Orteke is always executed in parallel with kuy, and a kuy is the whole dramatic art with the plot. Whichever tool is used for the Orteke show, the performing artist must maintain his relationship with the puppet, just as any other puppetry artist.

The goat figures are very small and can fit on the palm of a hand. Therefore, the show should be watched from a short distance; for the modern auditorium, using a projection of the dancing goats onto a big screen is beneficial. However, the audience usually prefers to surround the performer in a dense ring and watch these incredibly theatrical and expressive actions. The traditional Kazakhstani puppet theater Orteke is an example of the natural interaction of a puppet and its viewers.

The term "Orteke" means not only a show of animal figures, but also pieces of music – kuy and national Kazakh dance; all three forms of such shows originate from uniform actions inseparably linked to the steppe traditions of musical and dancing performances.

Orteke is also a type of applied art for Kazakhs; they use traditional technologies for the production of the dancing puppets: plates of fruit-trees or a poplar are dried first, and then the figures of goats are formed.

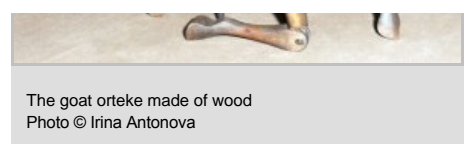
Today, Kazakhstani experts speak about Orteke as an original form of performance that brings the ancient art into the context of modern cultural life.

Annual Orteke festivals are held in Almaty, Astana and some of the other cities of Kazakhstan. It is to our regret that we don't take the opportunity to promote our so valuable and original cultural heritage via the Internet. These days Kazakhstan is developing a project to include Orteke onto UNESCO's list of the world's non-material cultural heritage.

The October socialist revolution of 1917 introduced to the Kazakh steppe not only a new economic way, but also new cultural installations, which in many respects were standardized both ideologically and in a formal manner. The manifestations of the traditional culture of the Kazakh nomads were perceived as communications with the "damned" past, which had to be discarded. The place of patriarchal art forms was taken very aggressively, by the alien Europeanized forms, burdened with obvious ideological content. Traditional Kazakhs' Orteke puppet shows were for a long time forced out by the so-called professional arts.



From the first days of the instatement of Soviet power, the Government paid special attention to arts for children who, as well as any other, had to serve the purposes of communism and bring up the patriots and builders of this communist society. Such ideological paradigms defined the form of existence of the puppet theater (it could be only state-owned), its repertoire and a certain set of the art's means of expression, which were in keeping within the framework of socialist realism as the leader and the one and only recognized form of art



The goat Orteke made of wood  
Photo © Irina Antonova



Character of Ukrainian fairy tale at the State Puppet Theatre in Almaty  
Photo © Irina Antonova © Irina Antonova

creativity in the Soviet Union. Puppets art was perceived as being addressed almost exclusively to children, and only some puppet theaters put on performances, not just for children, but also for adults. All Soviet theaters, including children's and puppets', before showing a performance to the viewers, had to present it for review to a specially appointed commission in the Ministry of Culture. This procedure was urged not to allow the penetrations onto the scene of works, ideologically harmful and artistically defective, from the point of view of official culture. Children's performances at the puppet theaters of all of the USSR didn't offer a big

variety, since those theaters also received lists of the plays recommended for staging.

The Almaty Puppet Theater is one of the oldest theaters in Kazakhstan. It was opened in 1935 as a puppet studio at the National Commissariat for the Education of Kazakhstan. In the 1930s-40s, some cities in the country also had their own working puppet theaters; however, subsequently some of them were closed, and others merged with troupes of drama theaters. The restoration of these theaters occurred only in the 1980s-90s.

During the years of World War II, Natalya Sats came to Almaty. She was the founder of Kazakhstan's first theater for children and youth. She was arrested in 1937 as "the wife of a traitor of the Homeland" and served a five-year sentence in the GULAG, and then, not having the right to live in Moscow, she worked in Almaty. Natalya Sats also helped to organize the puppet theaters in this Republic and the director of the Almaty Puppet Theater, Pavel Potoroka started working with her.

With all the support of art for children as it was declared by the State, the Almaty Puppet Theater (during those years, Almaty was the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan) for more than 50 years did not have its own location, and staged performances on non-purpose built platforms, and toured rural areas. There were neither means, nor personnel for the creation of more or less appropriate scenery and puppets. For a long time, the theaters didn't have skilled sculptor-artists, or professionally-qualified actors, qualified lighting and sound specialists; which still causes questions today. The theaters didn't use media exposure, but the saddest thing is that the most important material evidence of their long-term activities has often disappeared: such as the sketches of scenery and puppets. Today, the Almaty Puppet Theater, does have its own location at last (which are quite good), and has commenced its new history.



Characters of Russian fairy tales at the State Puppet Theater of Almaty  
Photo © State Puppet Theater of Almaty

Fairy tales have always been at the heart of the repertoire of the Kazakhstani theaters – clever and interesting tales; fantastic plots, which assume a mythology of the contents and a solid form, clear to the child, and therefore on the stages of puppet theaters, the great numbers of various kinds, of nice, and also artful, but re-educated animals – the Elephant calf, the Giraffe, the Behemoth, the Rooster, the Little Stork, the Wolf, and the Fox, and also the characters; the most popular in the Soviet Union being, the Crocodile Gena and the Cheburashka. The Cheburashka – a fantastic animal with large ears, which was incidentally found in a box for oranges, "an animal unknown to science" and which enjoyed the special love of the children. This kind and charming animal, a little reminiscent of a bear cub character was the favorite of the children in all of the former Soviet Union and this even continues today. The animated forces of nature – the Sun, the Stars, and the Trees, etc. – accompanied heroes, helped them, thus returning the audience to an initial epicism and the generality of the perception of nature.

Along with the performances of Kazakh and Russian fairy tales, there were also fairy tales from the people of the world; however preference was given to the playwrights and the fairy tales of the socialist countries and the people of the Soviet Union; such was an indisputable ideological instruction.

The understanding of puppet theater as a cultural and educational establishment demanded also taking on the plays of the Soviet writers, whose works were intended for children and recognized as being useful in the education of those young fighters for a bright communist future. Such an example was the performance of "Military Secret" on a stage of the Almaty Theater based on the story of the famous Soviet writer, Arkady Gaidar, whose works were extremely popular among the teenagers of all of the Soviet Union.

The design of puppets used by the Kazakhstani theaters was traditional: they were glove, gapit rod, and rod puppet. Sometimes, "real" actors acted along with puppets in a performance, as according to the directors, it could reconcile people and puppets, and harmonize their relations. However, the actors who had gotten used to working on screen weren't always as convincing as drama actors: there were no elementary acting schools, or professionalism.

The traditional scenery of a puppet performance for children was



most often made in the form of a colorful painted screen; also painted scenery was used in combination with beautiful, bright puppets and original music to show to the delighted children. The arrangement of a scene was similar to the arrangement of a scene in a usual drama theater. The street speeches of puppeteers weren't the normal practice in Soviet Kazakhstan, and improvisation in the course of the game wasn't welcomed.

In the 1980s, the director, Pavel Potoroka tried to introduce the art of marionette into Kazakhstani theaters; at this time in the Soviet Union there were only two marionette theaters – the Leningrad State Puppet Theater and the Theater of Marionettes headed by R. Gabriadze in Tbilisi (Georgia). As a result of the creative alliances of these theaters, there was a Kazakh-language performance of "the Tale of the Kitten and the Asterisk" based on a play by the Bulgarian writer, Z. Bilyarskaya.



Characters of Kazakh fairy tales at the State Puppet Theater of Almaty  
Photo © Irina Antonova

Soviet Kazakhstan did not offer puppet performances for adults, and shy talks started only at the end of the 1980s about an idea that puppet theater had a deeper meaning and could use more varied forms than children's fairy tales and New Year's Eve performances. Yet, the puppet theaters of Kazakhstan still rarely offer performances for adults.

Nevertheless, the Kazakhstani puppet theater has its own super-hero, equally loved by both children and adults. It is Aldar-Kosse [ALDAR-Koh-Seh] – the personification of the spirit of the Kazakh people, and their psychological and mental identity, the character uniting generations and also a personality close to all the nationalities living in today's Kazakhstan.

Aldar Kosse is rather a nickname of the main character; as his name literally translates as the "Beardless Deceiver". Nobody knows his name for real, as well as whether he ever lived at all, but it is assumed that the history of Aldar-Kosse originates in the Oghuz-Cumans age ( VI—XII centuries). Nevertheless, one can hear numerous entertaining stories about Aldar-Kosse in any *yurt* of a Kazakh village.



Characters of Uzbek fairy tales at the State Puppet Theater of Almaty  
Photo © Irina Antonova © Irina Antonova

Aldar-Kosse was poor and good-hearted, he unmasked tyrants, fought unfairness, and sided with unfortunate offended people. He did not own anything, he was an eternal nomad of the endless Kazakhstan Steppes. Aldar-Kosse deceives silly Itbhay, selfish Slambek, shameless liar Duysembhay, and the barbarous Dauhkarah just to rescue the beautiful Karashash – a girl who was supposed to get married to an old man named Orazbhay – and become his seventh wife.

Although people's memories bear a large number of stories about Aldar-Kosse, where he directly dealt with devils, giants, and shaitan, there is not a straight link between Aldar Kosse and mythology. It is interesting to point out that quite often in stories he strikes deals with them and "makes friends", but he always deceives them and does not allow the dark forces to hurt either himself or other people.

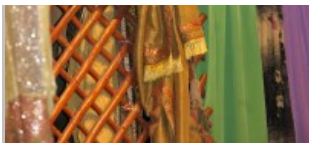
Aldar-Kosse stories have been impersonated in numerous scenic stages. It is a big misfortune that the theater did not save the original puppet of Aldar-Kosse that was utilized in the homonym stage play, but only photographs exist today. Yet another Aldar-Kosse puppet is found in *Alakai* – another Kazakhstani theater in Aktobe. The standard Aldar-Kosse puppet is usually uniformed: it's a rod-puppet operated by two or three masters. The puppet masters are usually expected to enliven the puppet with special dexterity and gestures and expressions, since throughout the play Aldar-Kosse performs satiric songs and "plays" the *dombra*. The puppet is usually dressed in a Kazakh traditional *borik* – a fox fur-trimmed hat, - in a white shirt and a colored vest. If the puppet has to show its legs, the spectators can see Aldar-Kosse's black boots. The puppet's face is very expressive with massive face features and an agile lower part of the face.



Sometimes, in modern stage arts, a real human model acts instead of the puppet, who interacts with the puppet characters as it was performed in the Almaty Puppet Theater in 2014. This approach allows for some enlargement of the role of the principal character and to set him aside, making his interactions with the audience more casual. But on the other side, this idea is somewhat controversial and at times calls for unjustified esthetic and technological disproportions in the play's structure.

Aldar-Kosse is an impersonation of our nation's traits: resilient, amiable, ingenious, and fits well into the heterogeneous society of modern Kazakhstan. He ties





Scene from performance "The Legend of steppe - Hey, Aldar!" at the Aktobe Puppet Theatre  
Photo © Aktobe Puppet Theatre

together the different ages of Kazakh arts – from ancient dancing *orteke* goats manipulated by *dombra*-players to the professional art of acting puppets.

Nowadays, there are more than ten working puppetry theaters in Kazakhstan that stage plays in the Kazakh and Russian languages; most of these theaters are state-owned. Since 2011, Almaty – the cultural capital of Kazakhstan has hosted the Annual International Puppet Theater Carnival. Almaty theater-goers have been enjoying plays by Russian, American, French, Italian, and Brazilian artists and puppet-masters, along with others from all over the world. Today, after years of compelled isolation from global theater activities, Kazakhstani Puppetry still demonstrates its openness and aspiration to integrate into the global family of stage puppets.

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Scene from performance "The Legend of steppe - Hey, Aldar!" at the Aktobe Puppet Theatre  
Photo © Aktobe Puppet Theatre

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